

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

U.S. House of Representatives

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Testimony Concerning the Reauthorization of the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act

Testimony By:

Robert McDowell

New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection

Division of Fish and Wildlife

P.O. Box 400

Trenton, New Jersey 08625

Mr. Chairman (and distinguished members) of the Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans, I want to thank you for holding this hearing today in order to gather important testimony pertaining to the Reauthorization of the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act (Act).

As the Director of New Jersey's fish and wildlife management agency, I am stating for the record that New Jersey feels there is a need to reauthorize the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act. This Act has played a vital role in the recovery of the Atlantic striped bass resource, including the enforcement, restoration and research aspects of striped bass management since 1984. Part of the success of the Interstate Fishery Management Plan for Striped Bass (Plan) has been due to interagency cooperation of all the partners, especially the Department of Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The USFWS has been instrumental in coordinating striped bass restoration through their hatchery network and the coastwide tagging program. They continue to maintain the coastwide tagging database, providing fishery managers data sets for a specific system for the entire coast.

Failure to reauthorize this Act concerns the State of New Jersey in that striped bass would become just another fish. It would be lumped in with other species under the Atlantic Coastal Fishery Cooperative Management Act, where the focus of funding or decision making would be on the species with the biggest problem at any particular time. New Jersey has elevated striped bass to gamefish status because the people of New Jersey understand the need for special protection for this species. Failure to reauthorize this Act would jeopardize the efforts of all those who fought to restore the Atlantic striped bass to its current level.

In regard to Section 9 of the Act, which gives the Secretary of Commerce the authority to promulgate regulations on striped bass fishing in the U.S. exclusive economic zone (EEZ), New Jersey would like to see a continuation of the current moratorium. New Jersey is concerned that opening the area could compromise our ability to enforce New Jersey laws regarding striped bass. New Jersey has had a long standing prohibition on the netting of striped bass in State waters. In addition, striped bass in New Jersey have been afforded gamefish status and as such, sale of striped bass is prohibited. Opening of the EEZ with specific provisions on striped bass will make it very difficult for conservation officers to enforce.

This Act also gives the ASMFC and the Secretaries the authority to determine compliance requirements of the Plan. If states or jurisdictions are found to be out of compliance with the Plan, the Secretaries may declare a moratorium on fishing for Atlantic Striped Bass within the coastal waters of those states or jurisdictions, or the landing of legally harvested striped bass from other jurisdictions in a state determined to be out of compliance. This authority is necessary for the continued success of striped bass management and should be maintained. The role of the Secretary of the Interior is important due to the wealth of expertise that exists within the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

This Act has also been a valuable source of funding with over a million dollars appropriated to the Secretaries of Commerce and Interior over the last three federal fiscal years and was instrumental in developing and conducting comprehensive studies on the various stocks of striped bass along the Atlantic coast. These include annual stock assessments to understand population dynamics, studies on the effects of environmental factors to various life stages of striped bass, interactions with other species, and other investigations crucial to the success of this magnificent species. At this time I believe it may be prudent to increase the amount of funding under this reauthorization, with a minimum of 50% of all funding dedicated at the State level for regional programs. The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) has strongly recommended that increased and improved data collection and analysis be funded to more accurately determine the status of the Atlantic Coast striped bass population. Further investigations need to be conducted with regard to by-catch mortality of striped bass in commercial fisheries, recreational hook and release mortality, improved recreational catch and harvest data (Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey {MRFSS}), density dependent inter-species competition and methods to reduce overall mortality.

Improvements in water quality have definitely helped striped bass populations. This is especially true in the Delaware River, where striped bass reproduction has increased dramatically. The pollution block around Philadelphia that prevented migration of spawning adults and out-migration of juveniles has all but disappeared.

New Jersey would like to express its concerns regarding the Potomac River Fisheries Commission's (PRFC) and its involvement with the ASMFC process. I believe that the PRFC does provide an extra vote for the region considering that Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia are both voting members of the ASMFC Striped Bass Management Board and are controlling members of the PRFC. It would be similar to having the Delaware River Basin Commission (DRBC), which is a multi-state cooperative agency, having a vote on the same ASMFC issues. Their role in this process should be reevaluated.

The New Jersey Striped Bass Bonus Program has been very successful. All effort and harvest data from the bonus fish program is published in New Jersey's annual report to the ASMFC. The bonus fish program has been designed to be extremely enforceable. The bonus fish cards must be filled out in advance and dated at the time of capture. Dating the cards can be accomplished by correctly perforating the card, which is easily done with a fish hook or fillet knife. This also makes the card unusable for another fish or fishing trip. Failure to perforate the card at the time of capture will result in a ticket if the angler is inspected by

enforcement personnel on the water or at shore based landing or fishing area. The amount of harvest in the bonus program is far less than the quota would allow, therefore making the program extremely conservative when compared to other states, which routinely take a majority of their quota.

This concludes my remarks and I want to thank you again for the opportunity to express the concerns of New Jersey.

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